

Quarterly Profile

OF NEW MEXICO CITIZENS

A UNM INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY SURVEY RESEARCH CENTER REPORT

SPRING 1992—VOL 4/NO 2

FOCUS: CAMPAIGNS AND ELECTIONS

This edition of the *Quarterly Profile of New Mexico Citizens* explores New Mexicans' attitudes toward campaigns and elections in the U.S. We have divided this report into three parts. First, we look at how New Mexicans evaluate the process of electing political leaders in the U.S., including perceptions about the fairness, effectiveness and outcomes of this process. Second, we look at attitudes about the information people receive during presidential campaigns, including media coverage of candidates and public opinion polls. Finally, we look at opinions about campaign financing. The remainder of this report examines a number of issues that we have been tracking since November of 1988, including an expanded section on perceptions about the performance of the national and state economies.

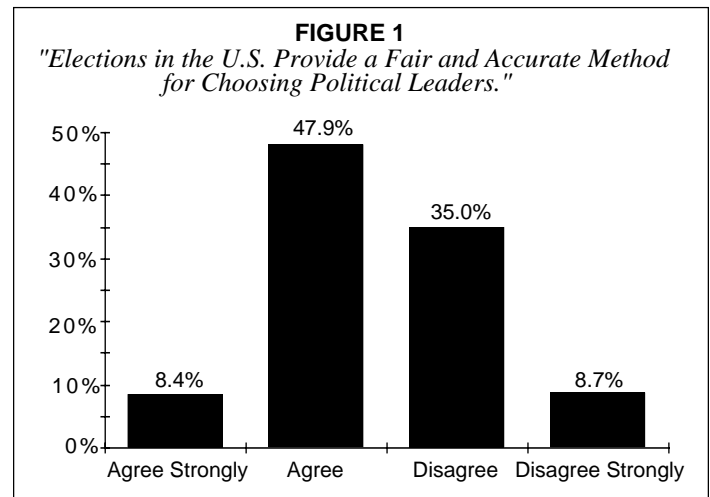
Summary

Is the U.S. electoral process working as it should? Most New Mexicans surveyed are skeptical. While a slim majority of respondents think elections are a fair and accurate method for choosing political leaders, *most* think that the winning candidate is not the best qualified. Why is a candidate elected? The most cited response was "favorable media coverage." The media is thought to focus on a candidate's "personal life" by a 2:1 margin over a candidate's "stand on the issues." Others think that the media gives the most attention to a candidate's "standing in the polls," yet opinions about the accuracy of these polls are mixed. Furthermore, most of those surveyed think political candidates rely too much on how well they are doing in public opinion polls. Paid television advertising, according to most, should be eliminated and replaced with other programs that provide equal amounts of information about each candidate. Although campaigns are thought to be so costly that the average citizen can't run for public office, respondents are *not* prepared to have the federal government incur the costs of these campaigns.

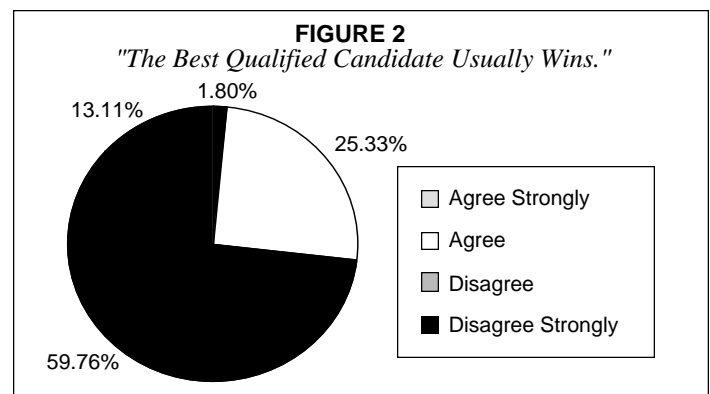
Electoral Satisfaction

Recently, there has been a lot of talk about voter disaffection in the U.S. In light of the upcoming presidential election, we were interested in the degree to which New Mexicans think "elections in the United States provide a fair and accurate method for choosing the political leaders that most people want." As shown in Figure 1,

56% of the New Mexicans surveyed either "agreed strongly" (8%) or "agreed" (48%) that elections provide a fair and accurate method for selecting our political leaders. A substantial portion, 44%, either "disagreed" (35%) or "disagreed strongly" (9%) with this statement.



Aside from an evaluation of the election process itself, we were interested in the degree to which campaigns and elections "usually result in the best qualified candidate winning." As shown in Figure 2, only 27% of New Mexicans surveyed either "agreed strongly" (2%) or "agreed" (25%) that the best qualified candidate usually wins. A majority of respondents, 73%, either "disagreed" (60%) or "disagreed strongly" (13%) with this statement.



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Electoral Satisfaction

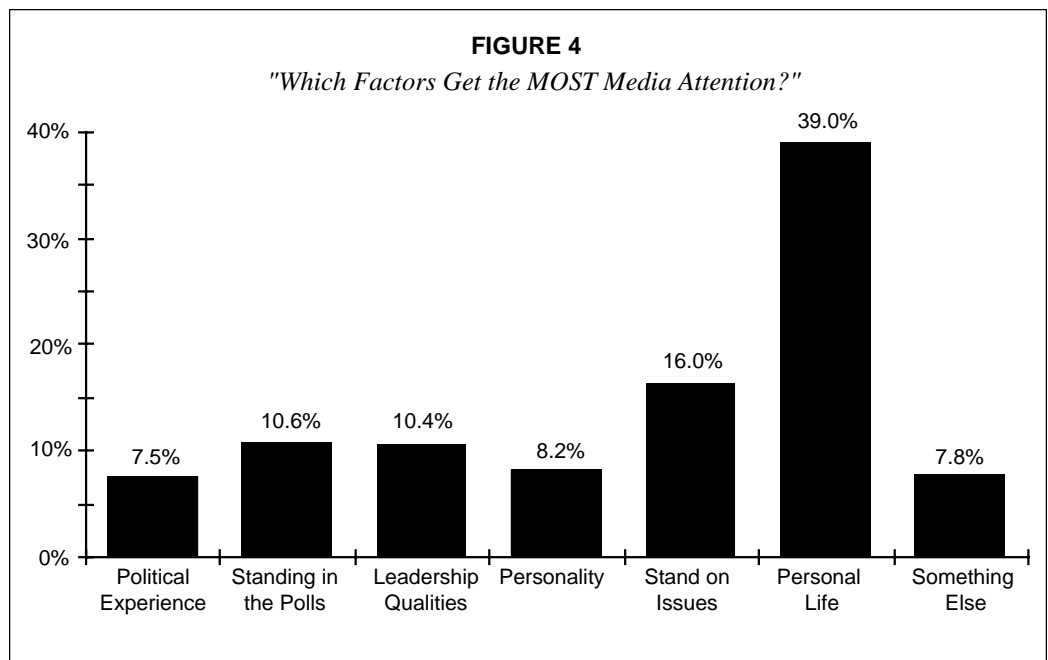
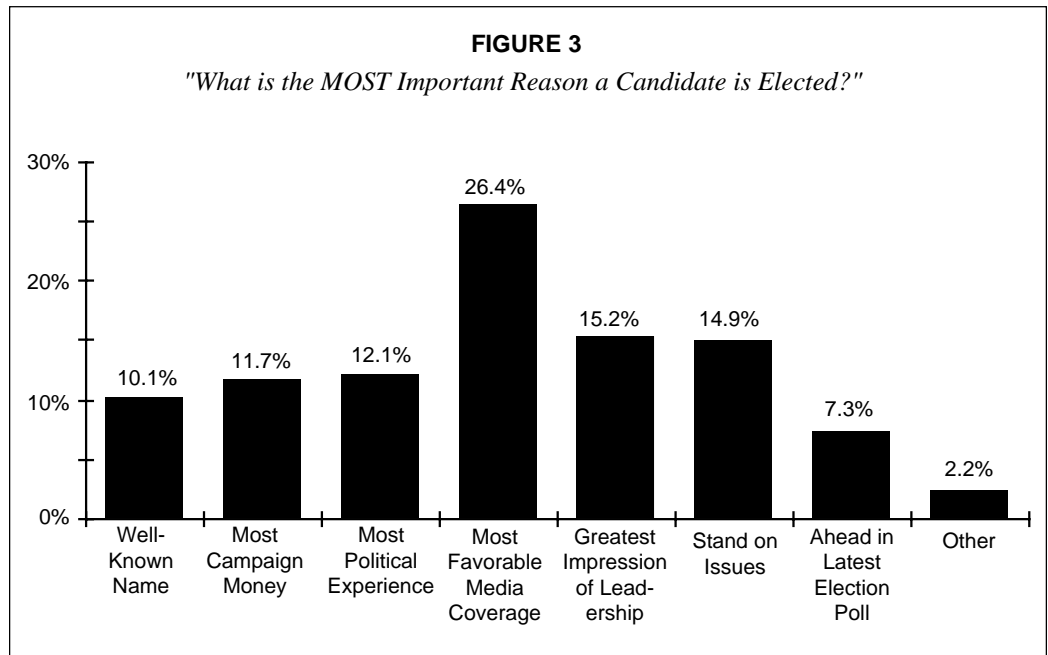
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If a majority of New Mexicans surveyed think that elections provide a “fair and accurate” method for choosing political leaders, why do only 27% think that the best qualified candidate usually wins? One reason may be that factors *outside* of the institutional electoral process are thought to influence the outcomes of elections. Respondents were read a number of different reasons why a candidate might win an election and asked “Which of the following do you believe is the most important reason a person is elected?” The most frequently chosen response was “the candidate who gets the most favorable media coverage” (26%). About 15% said either “the candidate who emphasizes his or her stand on the issues,” or “the candidate who gives the greatest impression of leadership.” Only 12% said “the candidate with the most political experience,” while another 12% chose “the candidate who spends the most money on campaigning.” See Figure 3.

Candidate Information: Media Coverage and Public Opinion Polls

As we have seen, “favorable media coverage” was most often cited as the key reason why a candidate wins an election. Yet, what is perceived to constitute media coverage? In this respect, we were concerned with identifying those candidate characteristics upon which the news media are believed to focus. Respondents were read a list of factors and asked, “When covering presidential candidates, which of the following factors gets the most media attention?” The most frequently chosen response was “personal life” (39%). About 16% said “stand on the issues,” while another 11% chose “standing in the polls.” About 10% said “leadership qualities,” 8% said “personality,” and 7% said “political experience.” See Figure 4.

Since 26% of respondents said that media coverage significantly influences the outcome of elections, and 11% said that a candidate’s “standing in the polls” gets the *most* media coverage, it



stands to reason that public opinion polls may play an important role in elections. We were concerned, first, with tapping perceptions about the accuracy of these polls. We asked respondents to indicate, “How accurate do you think public opinion polls are?” The scale ranged from one to ten, where one was “election polls accurately reflect the views of the public,” and ten was “polls do not accurately reflect public opinion.” As shown in Figure 5, about 34% said that polls “accurately reflect” public opinion. Almost an equal proportion, 33%, said that polls “do not accurately reflect” public opinion. Another 33% stated a position somewhere in between the two extremes.

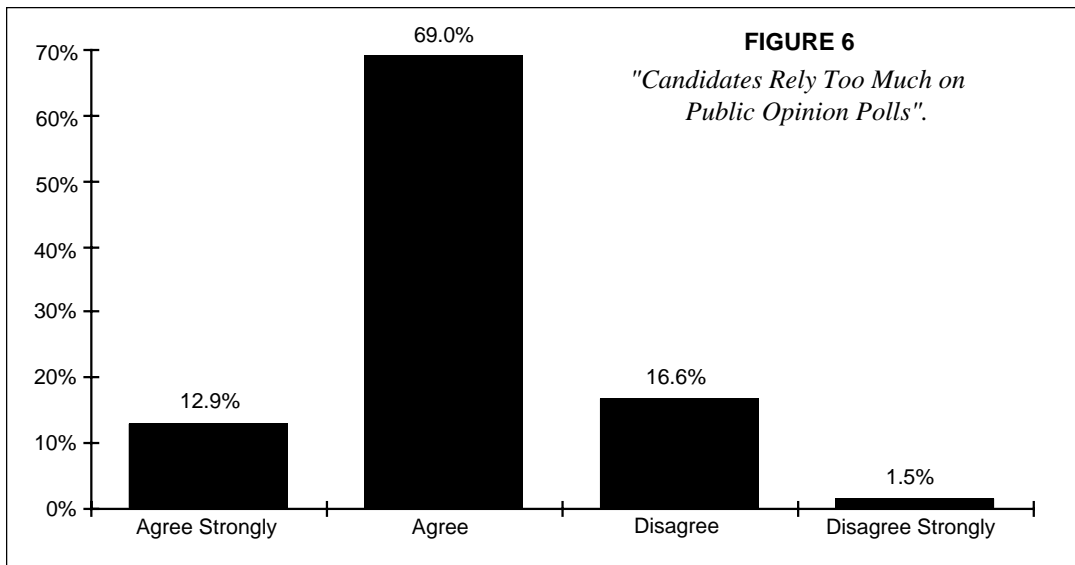
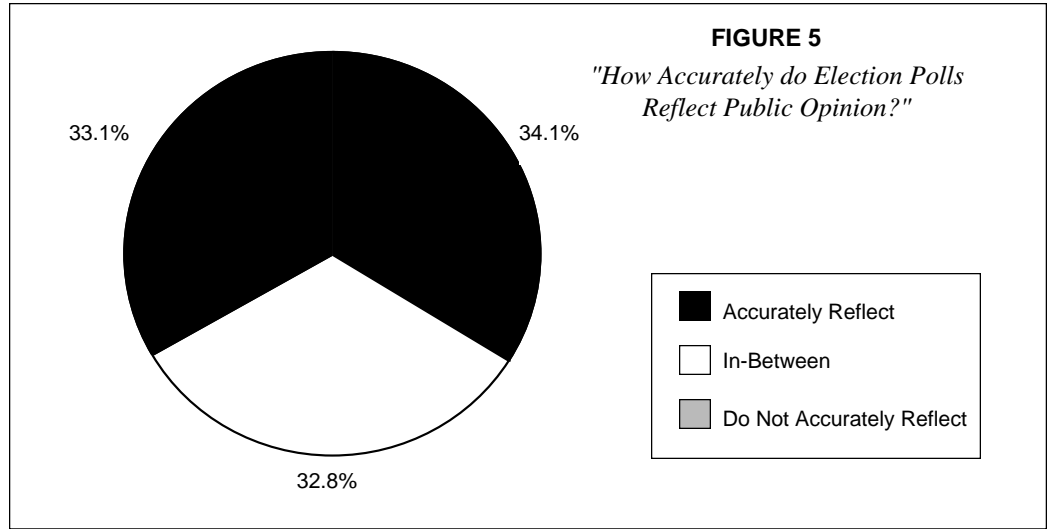
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FOCUS: CAMPAIGNS AND ELECTIONS

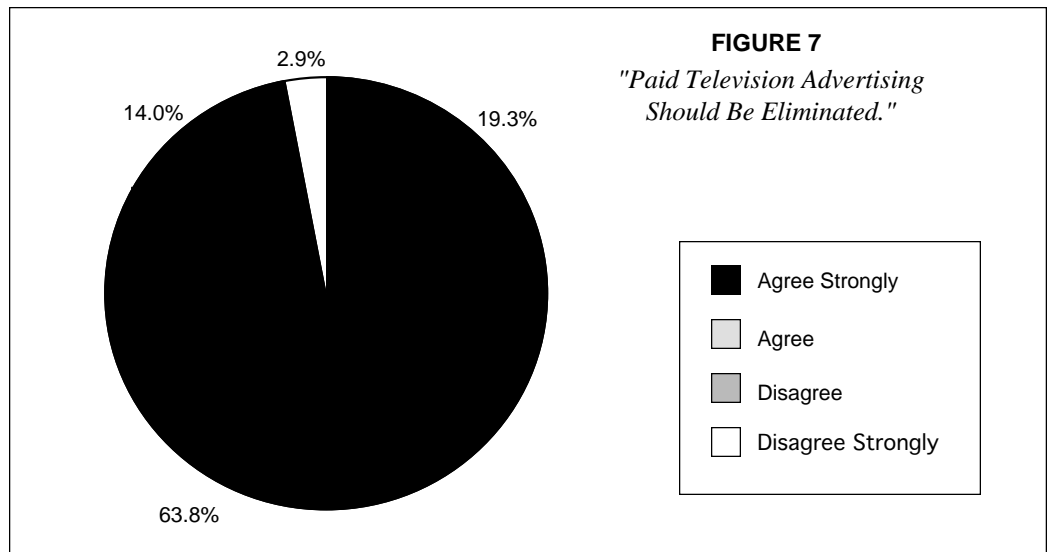
Candidate Information

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We were also concerned with the degree to which New Mexicans think “political candidates rely too much on how well they are doing in public opinion polls.” As shown in Figure 6, 82% of respondents either “agreed strongly” (13%) or “agreed” (69%) that candidates rely too much on polls. Another 18% either “disagreed” (17%) or “disagreed strongly” (1%) with this statement.



Aside from the news media, voters also get information about political candidates from paid television advertisements. We were interested in New Mexicans’ perceptions about these advertisements and presented respondents with the following statement: “Paid television advertising by presidential candidates should be eliminated and replaced with other programs that provide equal amounts of information about each candidate.” A large majority, 83%, either “agreed strongly” (19%) or “agreed” (64%) with this statement. Only 14% “disagreed,” and 3% “disagreed strongly.” See Figure 7.

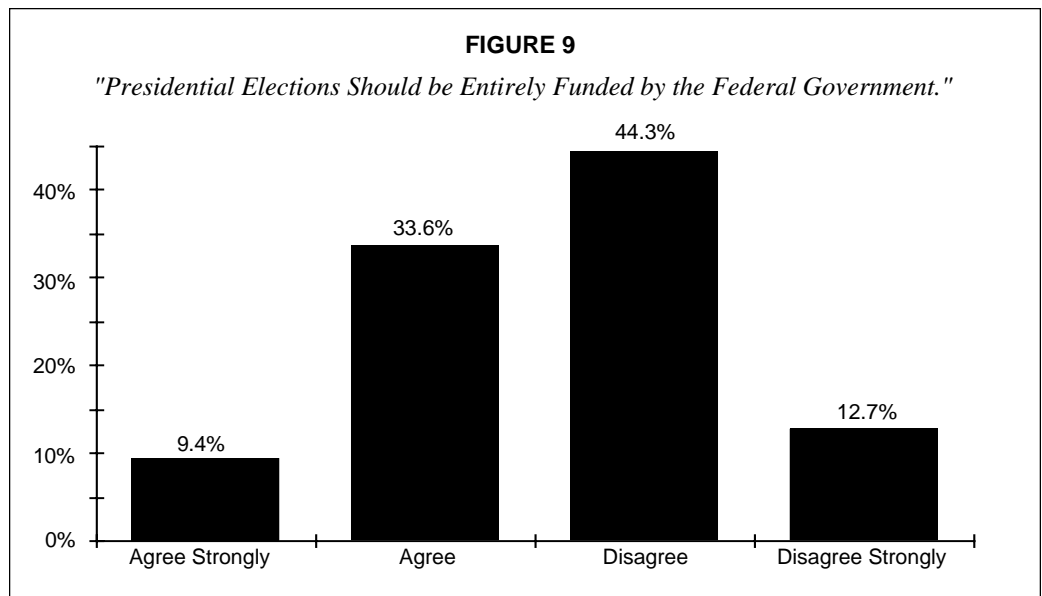
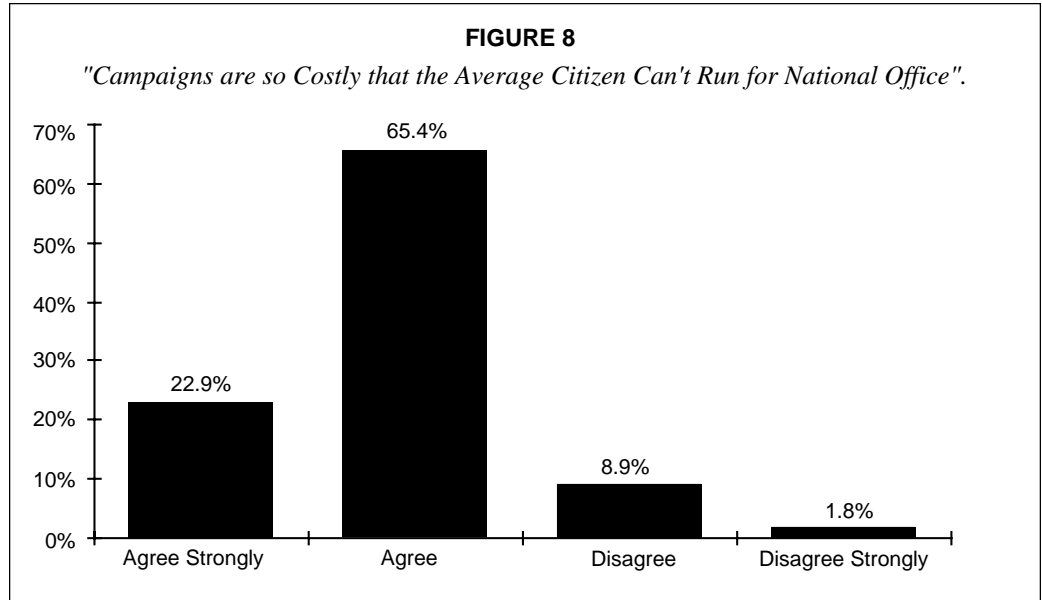


FOCUS: CAMPAIGNS AND ELECTIONS

Campaign Financing

When presented with the statement, "Election campaigns cost so much money that it prevents an average citizen from running for national office," an overwhelming majority (88%) "agreed." Only 11% disagreed with the statement. It is interesting to note that almost a quarter of the sample (23%) "agreed strongly" with the statement, indicating a very strong opinion about the issue. See Figure 8.

One way to overcome the prohibitive costs of running for office would be for the federal government to entirely fund political campaigns. Currently, presidential candidates *that qualify* are eligible to receive partial financing from the federal government in the primary elections. Full funding is presently available for the two major party candidates in the general election *only*. When presented with the statement, "Presidential elections should be entirely funded by the federal government instead of by private contributions," about 57% "disagreed" and about 43% "agreed" (see Figure 9). While the widespread belief is that campaigns are cost prohibitive, a majority of New Mexicans are not prepared to have the federal government incur the total costs of these campaigns.



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UNM INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

The Institute for Public Policy serves New Mexicans as a non-partisan forum for research, analysis, data collection and training. The Institute's Survey Research Center conducts surveys and research on the policy preferences and political attitudes of New Mexico citizens. The *Quarterly Profile* is distributed to federal, state, and local New Mexico policy makers, corporate and civic leaders, private organizations, the media and interested citizens.

SURVEY DATA

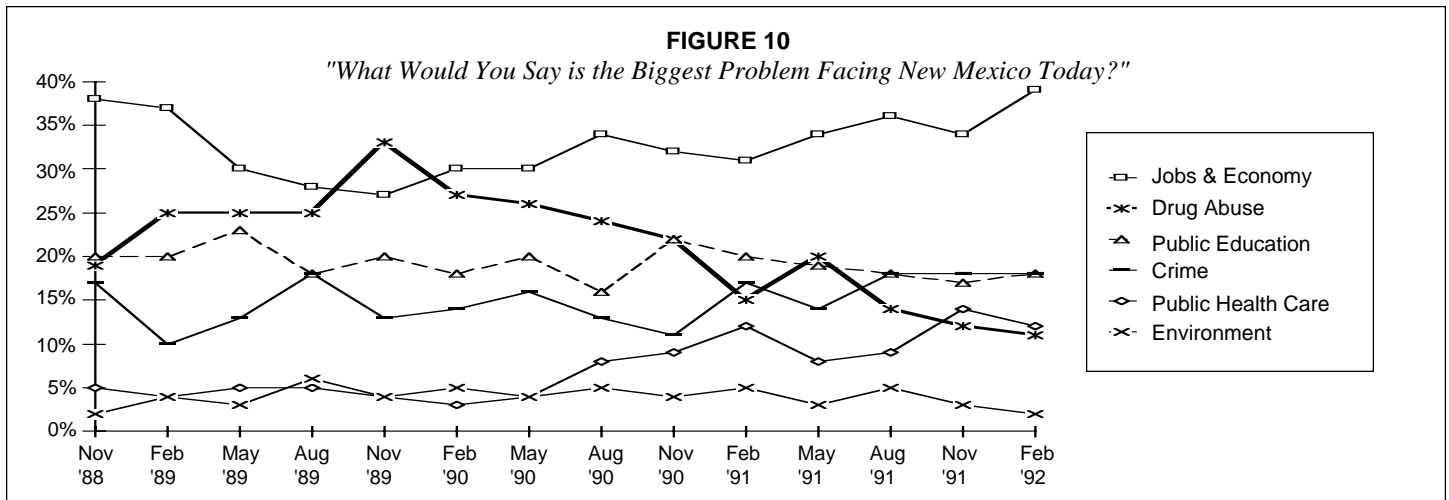
The UNM Institute for Public Policy conducted its survey of New Mexico citizens through telephone interviews with 557 adult New Mexicans in February of 1992. The telephone numbers were selected randomly by computer. The results of the poll have a five percentage point margin of error at a 95 percent level of confidence, which means that 19 out of 20 times the findings should be within 5 points of the results that would be obtained if all New Mexico households were surveyed. The margin of error is larger for subgroups of the sample because of the smaller number of observations. As with any survey a potential source of error is the possibility that variation in the wording of questions or the order in which questions are asked could produce different results.

TRENDS

Most Pressing Policy Concerns

Concerns about jobs and the economy reached their highest level since the *Quarterly Profile* began tracking New Mexicans' policy concerns in November, 1988. About 39% of those surveyed in the current time period said jobs/economy is the single biggest problem facing people in New Mexico today. Concerns about drug abuse, on the other hand, fell to their lowest point in the time series with only 11% describing it as the most pressing policy issue. Worries about

crime (18%) and public education (18%) were virtually unchanged from last November's survey and are presently tied for second place among the most pressing policy concerns. Once again, public health care was a slightly more critical issue for our respondents than drug abuse. Finally, concerns about the environment were again relatively minimal with only 2% of those surveyed saying it is the state's biggest problem at the present time. See Figure 10.



Economic Optimism

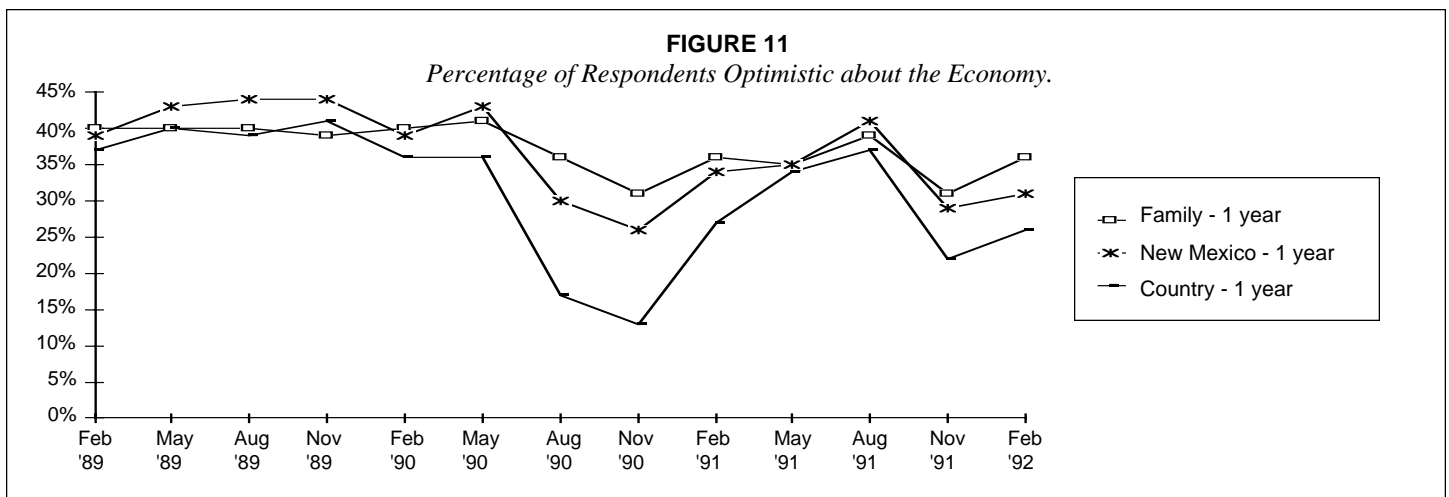
We are interested in New Mexicans' perceptions of the performance of various aspects of the economy. We asked three questions about expected financial conditions over the next year in an effort to tap "economic optimism." The first question asked respondents whether they expect their family's financial status to be better or worse off a year from now. The second question measured expectations about the performance of the New Mexico state economy, and the third question measured expectations about the performance of the national economy.

Overall, "economic optimism" was relatively low among those New Mexicans surveyed. Only 36% of respondents said that they expect their family will be "better off" financially a year from now. About 31% said that New Mexico will have "good times" during the next 12 months, and only 26% said that the country will

have "good times" during the next year. See Figure 11.

It is interesting to note that respondents were more "optimistic" about their personal financial futures than about the performance of either the state or national economies over the next year. Note additionally that "economic optimism" has increased in all three areas (personal, state and national) since last November's survey. Currently, New Mexicans appear more "optimistic" than they were in the last half of 1990, but less "optimistic" than they were in 1989 and the first half of 1990.

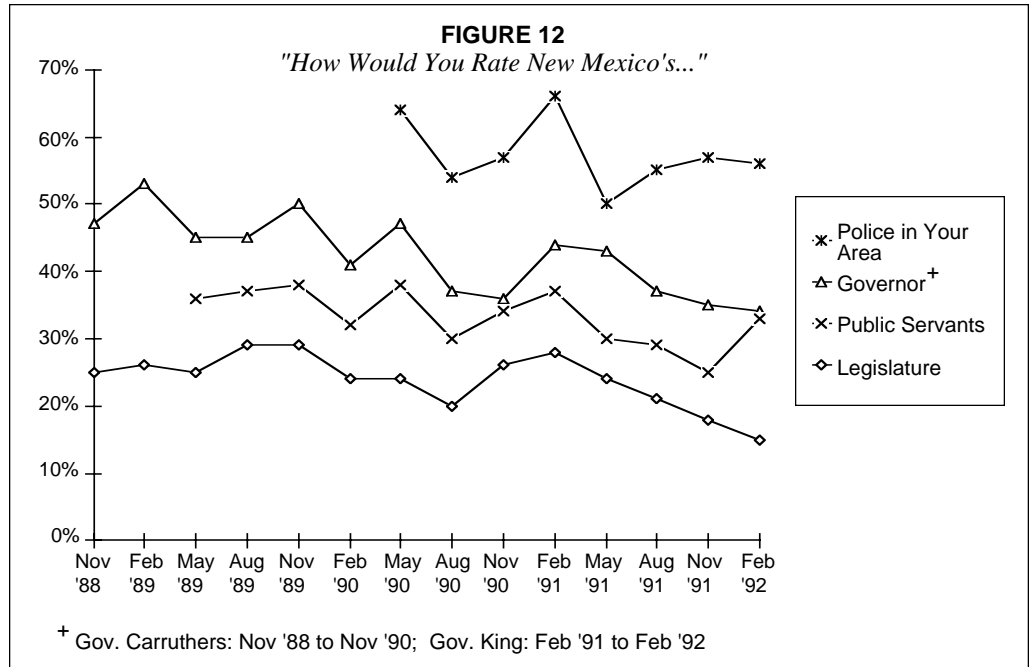
Pessimism about the future of the state and national economies is the most prevalent attitude. Nearly half of the respondents said that New Mexico will have "bad times" over the next twelve months (48%), while 56% said that the country will have "bad times" over the next year.



TRENDS

Citizen Approval Ratings*

New Mexicans' approval of the State Legislature fell to its lowest point since the *Quarterly Profile* began tracking it in November, 1988. Only 15% of those surveyed in the current time period approved of the Legislature's performance (1% said "excellent," and 14% said "good"), while 41% said it is doing a "poor" job. Approval for New Mexico's public employees, however, rose from 25% last November to its current level of 33%. Performance evaluations of Governor King and the state police were virtually unchanged. See Figure 12.



* Approval ratings are calculated as a percentage of those responding "excellent" or "good" by *all* respondents, regardless of whether they provided an answer to the question.

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